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ABSTRACT

Staff development continues to be an important but much-debated topic in adult basic education and adult literacy education. Some staff development professionals start with the "deficit" model, in which learners are presumed to be empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. This model ignores the rich and varied experience that practitioners bring with them, and it suggests that practitioners are not capable of deciding what they need in order to improve their own work or of directing their own professional development. A promising alternative to this often-used approach, the National Center on Adult Literacy's Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP), was initiated in 1991 to explore a new approach to building the professional work force by making practitioners' questions about their own practice the focus of staff development. ALPIP brings together adult literacy teachers, tutors, and administrators to form an inquiry community. Participants work collaboratively over time to explore topics of common interest, identify program-based needs and issues, critically analyze their own experiences and the literature in adult literacy from a field-based perspective, and carry out inquiry projects in their own program settings. These group inquiries inform each participant's reflective portfolio that leads to the selection of questions for sustained projects. Although each project is unique, two central themes cut across all of the projects to date: (1) the tensions that result from competing paradigms of literacy and learning; and (2) issues related to power in classes and programs. Members of ALPIP are organizing to support presentation and publication of their work and to provide a supportive professional network for members to assume more active roles in leadership. Such structures can enable those most responsible for adult education to grow and change. (KC)

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Staff Development at the Crossroads

By SUSAN L. LYTLE and PEGGY McGUIRE

In the current national conversation about adult basic/literacy education, the need for continuing professional development of the workforce is clearly a hot topic, and for good reason. The National Literacy Act of 1991 amended the Adult Education Act, a major source of funding of adult basic skills education in the U.S., to establish new requirements for State Education Agencies (SEAs) through which the federal funds are distributed. The Act now requires SEAs to set aside increased funds for staff development and special projects (up to 15% of a state's Adult Education Act allotment), two thirds of which *must* be used for staff development. Meanwhile, the states have until July, 1993 to seek input from a broad range of appropriate experts, educators, and administrators and to develop and implement a set of indicators for assessing program quality and for determining program funding.

Among the sample indicators that the U.S. Department of Education has provided for consideration by the states is this: "The program has an ongoing staff development process that considers the specific needs of its staff, offers training in the skills necessary to provide quality instruction, and includes opportunities for practice and systematic follow-up." Given the further federal mandate that states provide direct, equitable access to funding to a broad range of agencies and institutions, including community-based organizations, SEAs are currently busy forming task forces, holding statewide hearings, and otherwise collecting the information they will need to meet the requirements of the July deadline. It is a heady time, one that seems to hold the possibility that new ideas and promising directions in the field, including professional development of the adult education workforce, can find inclusion in the policies that guide future funding.

Professional development continues to be a highly problematic aspect of our work.

Professional development continues to be a highly problematic aspect of our work. We affirm its necessity, but we find little agreement about what it should look like. In fact, we have only just begun to define the characteristics of this workforce that we seek to "develop." It does seem clear that we continue to labor under the *deficit* model of education when considering staff development; in other words, adult education practitioners, like their students, are assumed to come to their work as empty vessels to be filled by outside knowledge and expertise. After sufficient *training* *(continued on page 9)*

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(e.g., courses, workshops, and seminars), they will be credentialed and therefore adequate to their tasks in the classroom.

As with similar assumptions about the adult learners with whom we work, the deficit model ignores the rich and varied experience that practitioners bring

We have a unique chance to consider promising alternatives.

with them. It also suggests that practitioners are not capable of deciding what they need in order to improve their own work or of directing their own professional development. Furthermore, by isolating individual practitioners to remediate their inadequacies, traditional notions of staff development bypass the crucial connection between individual professional development and overall improvement of the organizations in which they work.

At the very least, by perpetuating this stance we lose the considerable resources of the true insiders who can identify what adult education programs must do in order to meet participants' needs. Program administrators, then, are left to strike a nervous balance between assuring program excellence and promoting staff development opportunities which may have little reference to program quality. At the crossroads in our policy-making, we have a unique chance to consider promising alternatives to what currently serve as acceptable professional development activities.

NCAL's Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP) was initiated in 1991 to explore a new approach to building the professional workforce by making practitioners' questions about their own practice the focus of staff development. Building on the traditions of action and participatory research as well as teacher research, ALPIP brings together adult literacy teachers, tutors, and administrators to form an inquiry community. Participants work collaboratively over time to explore topics of common interest, identify program-based needs and issues, critically analyze their own experiences and the literature in adult literacy from a field-based perspective, and carry out inquiry projects in their own program settings.

The ALPIP approach to staff development purposefully builds on the richness and diversity of the real-world experience and knowledge that practitioners currently bring to the field. Meeting biweekly, teachers, tutors, and administrators from a wide range of program sizes and types and, as is typical in the field, very different backgrounds and job profiles are finding this cross-program community a supportive context for generating and disseminating new knowledge from and for the field.

In reading, writing, and talking together, participants explore in some depth current issues and tensions in the field—the differences between "training" and "education," the multiple definitions of literacy and their implications for practice in different contexts, negotiating roles and power in learner-centered education, congruent assessment—as well as topics related to cultural and linguistic

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diversity. Shared readings provide a starting point for observing and documenting the ways such issues play out in their own practices. Meeting regularly in journal and job-alike groups, participants find common ground across diverse settings. They help each other unpack assumptions by making daily practice problematic, exploring the extent to which current strategies are meeting the distinctive needs of adults in particular programs.

These group inquiries inform each participant's reflective portfolio that leads to the selection of questions for sustained projects—systematic and intentional inquiries into daily practice—conducted at program sites. Many of these projects are carried out as co-investigations with

These processes enable group members to deepen their understandings of the wider field.

learners, teachers, or staff members not directly involved in ALPIP. By reconfiguring themselves into research groups clustered around common themes, participants assist each other in data collection and analysis. To do this, structured oral inquiry formats have been developed for looking closely and descriptively at pieces of data collected by each participant. These processes enable group members to deepen their understandings of the wider field through immersion in other participants' particular contexts.

Although each project is unique to the particulars of individuals and program contexts, two central themes cut across all of the projects to date: the tensions that result from competing paradigms of literacy and learning, and issues related to power in classes and programs. Specific topics investigated by ALPIP participants so far include tutors' beliefs about learning to read; collaborative revision of learner writing; leadership in participatory programs; responses of adult learners to culturally-relevant literature and culturally responsive pedagogies; learner self-assessment; whole language in literacy programs for deaf adults; learner-initiated strategies for improving retention; and the nature of staff development itself in community-based programs for women.

While each of these projects contributes to improving the practice and building the knowledge base of those participating in the group, the potential contribution to the wider field depends on

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designing supportive structures for critique and dissemination of the work beyond the local community. To this end, members of ALPIP are organizing to support the presentation and publication of their work in different forums and for different audiences. Many are seeking further opportunities for conducting inquiry-based staff development in other contexts. Inquiry-based staff development communities such as ALPIP also provide a supportive professional network for members to assume more active roles in leadership of local, regional, and national literacy activities

Another promising outcome of the work to date is the initiation of a *program-based* ALPIP using funding from the state's staff development allotment through the Major's Commission on Literacy. ALPIP participants are facilitating groups of staff at their own program sites who are conducting practitioner research on common or closely related topics. The four programs involved this year are meeting periodically across sites to share questions, issues, and findings. The effort here integrates staff/professional development

Inquiry-based staff development communities such as ALPIP also provide a supportive professional network for members to assume more active roles in leadership.

even more directly with program improvement, thus strengthening the efforts of individual practitioners to effect programmatic and eventually systemic change.

As an NCAL research project, ALPIP provides an ongoing context for studying the implementation of inquiry-based approaches to staff development in adult literacy education (see NCAL Technical Reports by Lytle, Belzer, and Reumann, 1992, 1993). Although inquiry-based approaches vary across contexts, they have in common an effort to build on what people in the local setting know and want to know. Thus, there is the potential, here and in other related projects elsewhere, to learn a great deal about what practitioners who work daily in the field regard as the most persistent and important issues for practice, research and policy development. At the crossroads, with the highest quality and most consistently effective adult literacy education as our goal, we need staff development strategies that strengthen the intellectual foundations of practice, both in classes and in the cultures of programs. The argument here is for supportive structures through which those most responsible for enacting policies at the grassroots level can impel their own growth and change. ■

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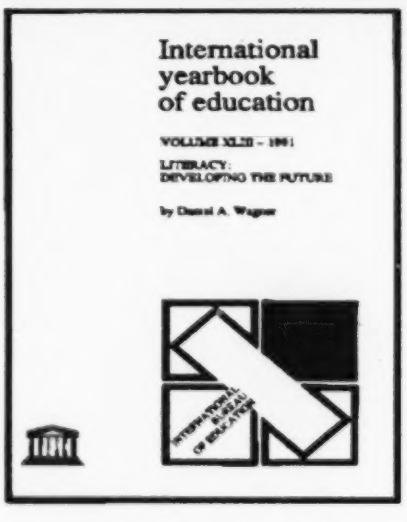

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